

Jeremy Miles

AC Dros Gastell-nedd / AM for Neath

JM/ve060619

Mr Aled Evans
Director of Education
Neath Port Talbot CBC
Civic Centre
Port Talbot

28th June 2019

Dear Aled,

Re Home to School Travel Policy 2020 – Consultation

Further to the recent publication of Neath Port Talbot Council's consultation document on the future provision of school transport services, we are writing to express our serious concerns at proposals contained within that document.

We have both already been contacted by a number of constituents who are extremely worried at what is being proposed, particularly around the new policy of “parental preference” and the detrimental impact that this will have both on the Welsh language, post 16 ALN students, and pupils attending faith schools.

1. Welsh Medium Education

You will be aware that the Welsh Government's aim of reaching a million Welsh speakers by 2050 is a significant challenge and as such, education is key to the success of that policy. This is an ambitious target and the Welsh Government rightly expects councils to play their part in achieving that. Whilst the council has of course significantly invested in the fabric of Welsh-medium comprehensive provision in the county borough (which is very much welcomed), there is much more the council can do to support Welsh language provision, including in the primary years where no new schools have been opened since Ysgol Gynradd Gymraeg Tyle'r Ynn, Llansawel in 1997.

In light of this, the proposals to increase the yearly post-16 charge from £100 a year to £390 a year for those attending Ysgol Gyfun Ystalyfera Bro Dur on the grounds of “parental preference” will clearly impede learners from accessing post 16 education in Welsh. Pupils are wholly reliant on the school bus service offered by the local

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authority, in the absence of an adequate commercial bus service, if they want to receive post 16 Welsh medium education.

In addition, the added constraint that if year 7 to 11 pupils take all of the allocation and there are no spare seats, there will be no allocation at all for year 12 and 13 pupils. It is also important to note that as pupils from the feeder areas for the new school in Sandfields (Ysgol Bro Dur) will no longer travel to the site at Ystalyfera North for their 11-16 education there will be no regular transport to that site and thus no possibility of available spaces being on a bus.

At a time when there should be a strategic focus on supporting the viability of Welsh-medium education to reflect the investment in the school estate, this proposal instead poses an intolerable threat to it.

2. Additional Learning Needs

Serious concerns have been raised with us relating to the proposal to deny transport when a parent of a child with ALN, challenges the local authority's choice of placement for their child.

We are aware that disagreements over ALN placements between the local authority and parents are unfortunately not uncommon, however I understand that they are resolved through a process of mediation and the right placement is found for the child. When a parent is considering a placement for the ALN child, the focus is on the child's health, safety and educational potential at the setting, rather than the location. As a result, there are fears that this proposal could effectively unfairly deter parents from challenging the LEA's choice of placement, even if they believe that it is not appropriate for their child. This could then result in a child being placed in an inappropriate setting.

Parents who have contacted us feel that when placements are decided, it is not appropriate to class them as "*parental preference*" as while there is parental input in that decision, the child's needs ultimately must be the deciding factor in a child's placement.

The proposal to deny transport to those with Motability vehicles would also pose a seriously disadvantage to parents and carers alike. Many parents have more than one child in different schools, all needing to arrive at school on time. While this is through no fault or choice of the parents, they find themselves in an impossible situation and face seeing a child missing a number of hours schooling a week as a result of this proposal. Many of those caring for disabled children, fit in their work around school pick up times.

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Often a child's DLA is awarded on a one year basis, which would result in a transport shortfall while the parents reapply or appeal and increased anxiety for children, due to routine disruption and a lack of regular transport. A child's personal benefits should not allow the local authority to deny school transport and this proposition could result in parents making a difficult decision between a vital Motability car for their child or school transport.

On the question of single occupancy vehicles, we would welcome clarification of the criteria on the basis of which a pupil is eligible for this type of transport. Those children who do currently access this provision do so because of their behavioural difficulties and difficult previous experiences on shared transport. You will recognise that this proposal is causing serious anxiety to those who currently depend on this service.

3. Faith Schools

St Joseph's RC School in Port Talbot, is the only Faith secondary school in Neath Port Talbot. Families whose children for example currently attend St Joseph's Catholic Primary in Hillside Neath, have no other option but to send their children to the secondary school in Port Talbot, if they wish for them to continue with their education at a Faith school. The increase in charge for purchase of a spare seat from £260 to £390 is therefore unfairly penalising those parents for their decision of seeing their child receive education based upon their faith.

We recognise the tough financial pressures that the council, like councils all over Wales, is facing as a result of the Tory government's cuts to the funding we have available to us in Wales. However, we believe that these proposals are unfair and need to be reconsidered. The council has demonstrated that it listens to public opinion following consultation, as seen recently when it took full account of public objection to its proposals to cut library provision. We both welcomed the resulting decision by the council ultimately to protect the libraries.

We urge the council now to recognise the scale of public concern about these proposals and to withdraw them.

Yours sincerely,



Jeremy Miles AM for Neath



David Rees AM for Aberavon

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